Baby Steps

Created by Katsuki Hikaru

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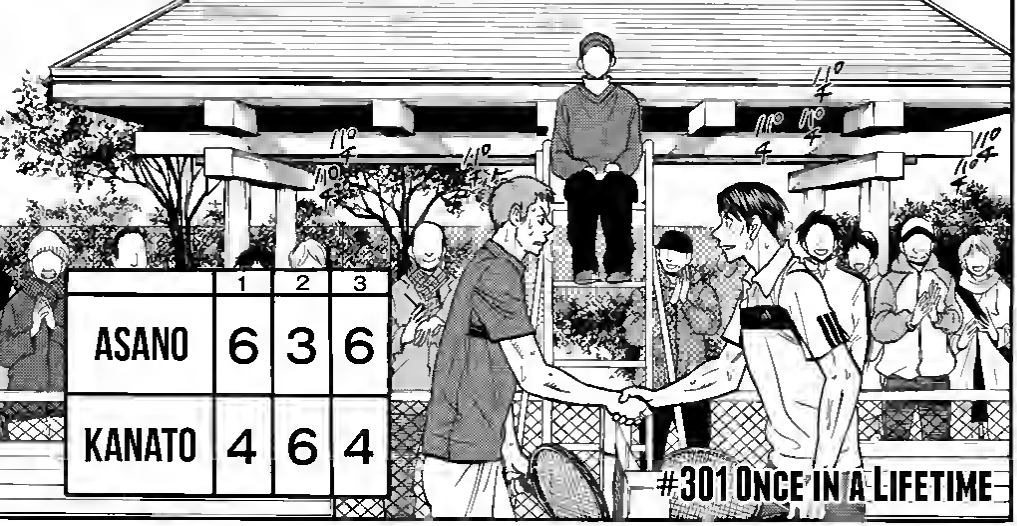
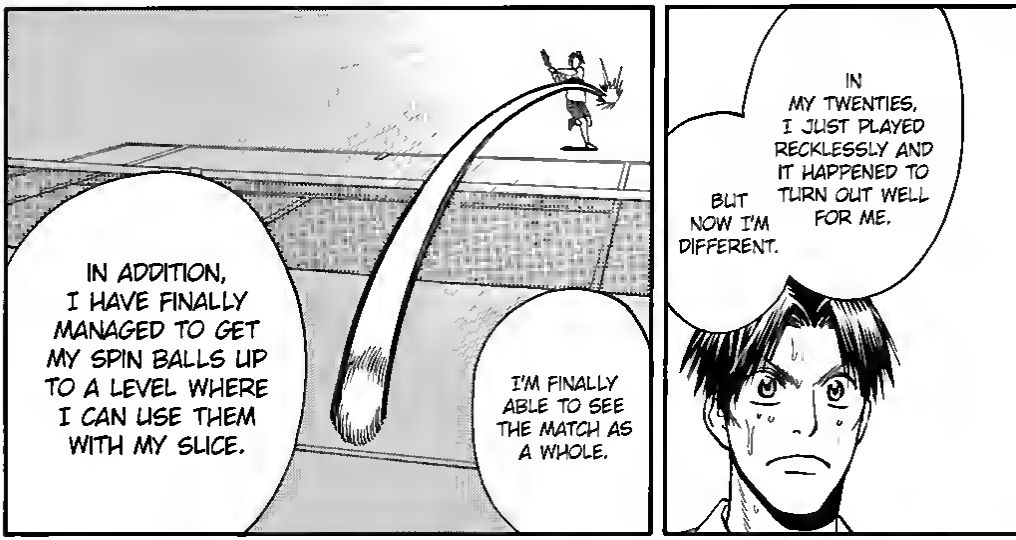
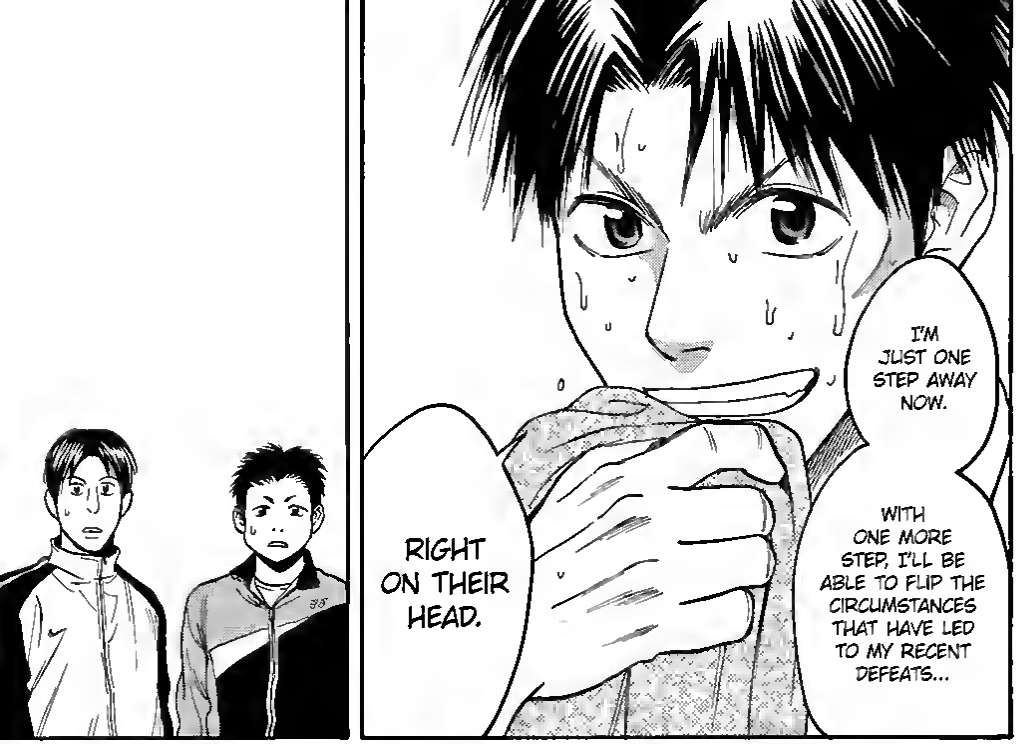


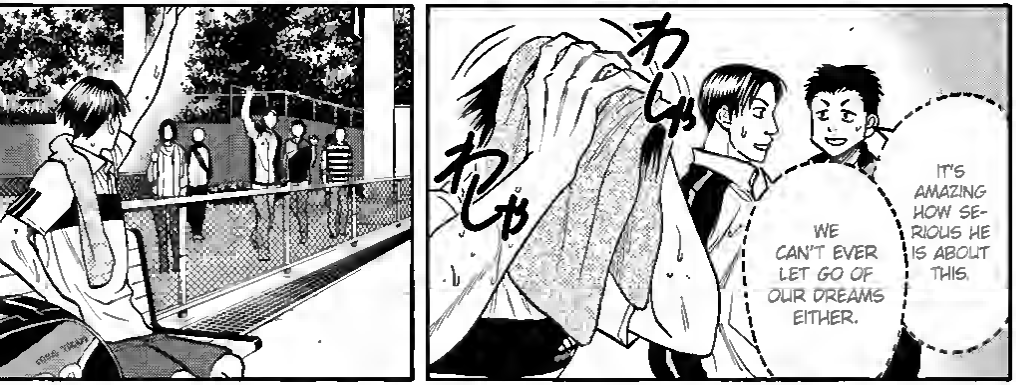
#301 Once in a Lifetime

NICE GUTS YOU SHOWED THERE, ASANO-SAN!
OOH, IT'S YOU TWO.
YOU'RE INCREDIBLE. IT'S NOT OFTEN YOU SEE TENNIS LIKE THAT FROM A 35 YEAR OLD!
THAT WAS AWESOME! I HAVE MAJOR RESPECT FOR YOU!
I HOPE I CAN PLAY LIKE YOU DO 10 YEARS FROM NOW!

HUH? WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? I'M JUST GETTING STARTED HERE.
IF ANYTHING, RECENTLY I'VE FINALLY FIGURED OUT A LOT OF STUFF.


IN MY TWENTIES, I JUST PLAYED RECKLESSLY AND IT HAPPENED TO TURN OUT WELL FOR ME.
BUT NOW I'M DIFFERENT.
I'M FINALLY ABLE TO SEE THE MATCH AS A WHOLE.
IN ADDITION, I HAVE FINALLY MANAGED TO GET MY SPIN BALLS UP TO A LEVEL WHERE I CAN USE THEM WITH MY SLICE.

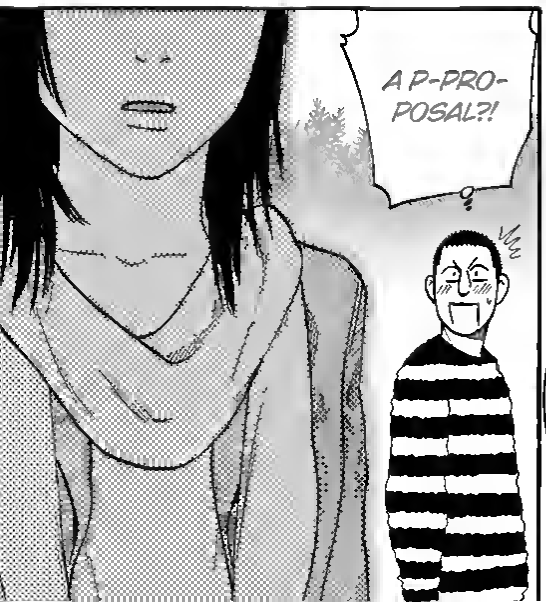

I'M JUST ONE STEP AWAY NOW.
WITH ONE MORE STEP, I'LL BE ABLE TO FLIP THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT HAVE LED TO MY RECENT DEFEATS...
RIGHT ON THEIR HEAD.


わしゃ
わしゃ
IT'S AMAZING HOW SERIOUS HE IS ABOUT THIS.
WE CAN'T EVER LET GO OF OUR DREAMS EITHER.

AHH?!
AND THEN ONCE MORE I'LL HEAD OUT TO THE WORL—
THIS YEAR I'LL GET TO THE MAIN TOURNAMENT FOR SURE—
NO, TO THE TOP OF JAPAN.

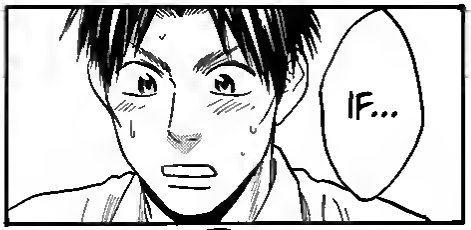
NENE!
YOU CAME TO WATCH ME... THANKS!
YOU WERE WATCHING RIGHT? THIS PAST YEAR I'VE BEEN IN BETTER SHAPE THAN EVER BEFORE.
THAT'S FINE AND ALL, BUT THIS IS THE SEVENTH YEAR YOU'VE SAID THAT, YOU KNOW?

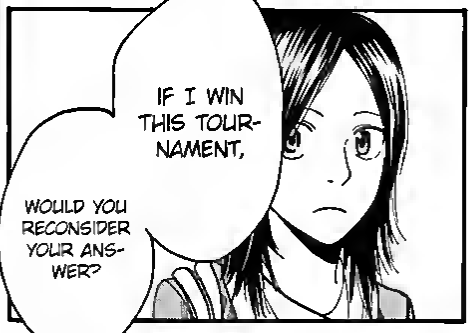
WOULD YOU MARRY ME?


A P-PRO-POSAL?!

I CAN FINALLY MAKE USE OF THE NEW SHOTS I'VE BEEN PRACTICING IN REAL MATCHES.
D-DON'T SAY IT LIKE THAT.
THAT'S UNEXPECTEDLY IMPRESSIVE FOR YOU.

A-ANYWAY, JUST SEE HOW MUCH I'VE IMPROVED.
AND THEN IF...


IF...


IF I WIN THIS TOURNAMENT,
WOULD YOU RECONSIDER YOUR ANSWER?

SHUT IT.
SFX WHAAA
えーん
えーん
I'VE ALWAYS INTENDED ON MARRYING YOU AS WELL.
BUT... WHAT'S YOUR DEAL?

NOT ONLY DID YOU TURN DOWN AN OFFER BY A COACH WHO HAS TRAINED FAMOUS PROS BEFORE,
YOU TURNED DOWN AN INAUGURATION BY THE COACH OF THE NATIONAL TEAM.
EVEN EMPLOYMENT OFFERS BY SPORTS MAKERS... YOU REJECTED EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!
IN THE END, YOU ALSO BROKE OFF THE CONTRACT WITH THE FIRM THAT WAS SUPPORTING YOU...
I WILL TAKE YOU TO WIMBLEDON!
BOYHOOD
NO MATTER HOW YOU PROPOSE...
THERE'S NO WAY I COULD BELIEVE YOU!
IN FACT, YOU DON'T EVEN SPARE A MOMENT TO THINK OF ME!
T-THAT'S NOT TRUE!
THEN WHY DO YOU HAVE TO REJECT EVERYTHING SO IMPULSIVELY?!

THE WORLD STAGE IS RIGHT AT MY FINGERTIPS AGAIN!
I CAN FEEL THAT I'M ACTUALLY GETTING SOMEWHERE...
THAT'S...
BECAUSE THERE IS STILL A CHANCE FOR ME.
MY COMING HERE WAS A MISTAKE.
SFX: SIGH
は！
NENE!
PLAYING AS A PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYER IS MORE IMPORTANT TO YOU THAN ANYTHING AFTER ALL...
BUT
AFTER SEEING YOUR FACE FOLLOWING THE MATCH YOU HAD TODAY, I'M SOMEWHAT SATISFIED.

NENE...
EVEN IF IT'S JUST FOR THIS TOURNAMENT... JUST THIS ONCE...
WOULD YOU COME AND WATCH AS MANY OF MY MATCHES AS YOU CAN?

I JUST WITNESSED SOMETHING INCREDIBLE.
Awawa
Awawa
I THINK...

ALL JAPAN TENNIS
全日本テニス選手権
1 2 3
AKIMOTO ISAO
3 7
MARUO EIICHIRO
6 4
COURT 11. MARUO EIICHIRO VS AKIMOTO ISAO

● Weak points:

① A backhanded slice (This stroke is only used in one pattern?)

② On a narrow forehand, he often hits down the line.

KUH.
HE'S OFF BALANCE. I'LL GET THE POINT...
RIGHT HERE!!
YESS!
GAME MARUO

used to start an attack)
② A Forehanded cross (Frequently used to st
③ When cornered, he uses either forehands o
both with a high level of skill
Volley: Does not come to the front unless in a
• Weak Points
① Backhand slice: (This stroke is only used in one
② On a narrow forehand, often misses down the line
③ Comparing the second serve to the first, control and
• Strengths:
① Forehand cross at a sharp angle —>
② Strong spin deep to opponent's
overwhelm with backhands for th
③ His second serves lack control
THE SECOND SERVE IS MY CHANCE!
15-0
ハァ
ハァ
ハァ

KUH.
OUT
I CAN WIN THIS IN TWO MORE POINTS.
WHEN BACKED INTO A CORNER, AKIMOTO-SAN USUALLY RELIES ON...
control it from the boundary line)
② A Flat towards the centre (success rate is low, but is
strong when it does)
Stroke! ① A Backhanded cross (Because it goes deep with the
strong spin, can also happen. Used to start an attack)
② A Forehanded cross (Frequently used to start an attack)
③ When cornered, he uses either forehands or backhands,
high level of skill
Volley' Does not come to the front unless in a perfect position, so when he does come up he finishe
● Weak Points

A CROSS!
HE... TOTALLY KNEW I WAS GOING TO DO THAT?!
SHIT... WHAT'S GOING ON?!

GAME SET AND MATCH. WON BY MARUO
YEAH!!

MY BODY IS IN PERFECT CONDITION, AND I'M SLOWLY GETTING MORE AND MORE IN THE SWING OF THINGS!
THANK YOU VERY MUCH!
I HAD LOADS OF DATA AND WAS ABLE TO MAKE EFFICIENT USE OF IT!
I WAS ABLE TO PLAY TO MY OWN STYLE!

I THOUGHT I'D STILL HAVE SOME REGRETS ABOUT BECOMING A PRO...
BUT I FEEL SOMEWHAT FULFILLED.

HE WAS TAKING NOTES DURING THE MATCH AND HE EVENTUALLY DEVISED A STRATEGY THROUGH TRIAL AND ERROR
NO... I DOUBT HE HAD JUST THOROUGHLY RESEARCHED ME BEFOREHAND.

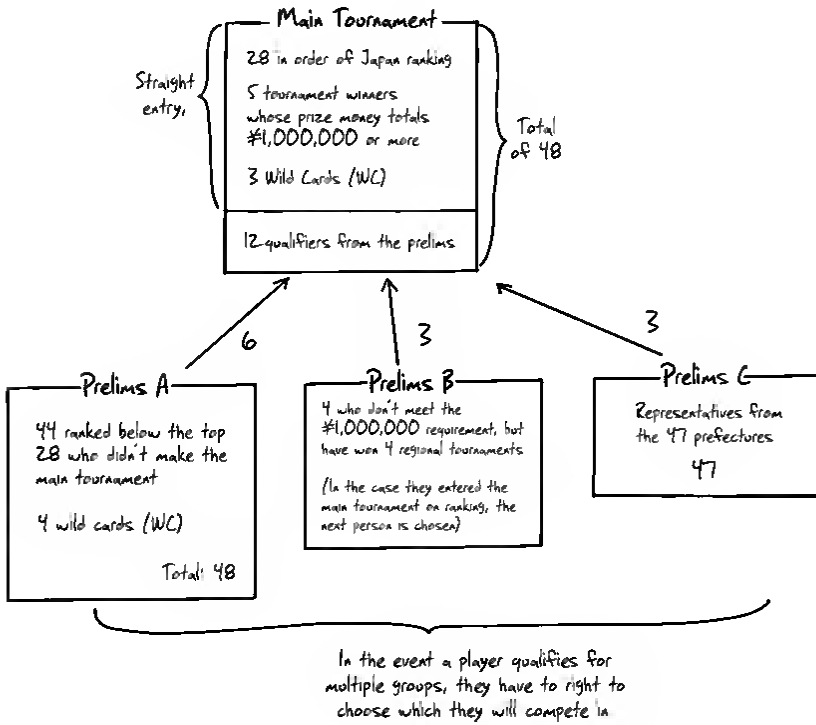
HAVE I EVER BEEN ABLE TO FOCUS THAT MUCH ON MY OPPONENT BEFORE? EVEN JUST ONCE?

I THINK I'M ACTUALLY GLAD I GOT TO PLAY IN THESE PRELIMINARIES BEFORE THE MAIN TOURNAMENT
WHEN ONE TALENT IN A GENERATION POPS UP, ALL THE REST START APPEARING ONE AFTER THE OTHER.
THAT'S THE SAME CLUB AND EVEN AGE GROUP THAT IKE SOUJI USED TO BE IN...
THAT KID'S GOOD. HE'S STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL, ISN'T HE?
MARUO EIICHIRO FROM STC, HUH?
YES... IT JUST FINISHED NOW.
AH, ASANO-SAN. HELLO.
IS YOUR MATCH ALREADY OVER?
HUH? MARUO-KUN.
THAT MEANS...
!
THAT'S A SHAME. I CAME OVER TO DO SOME SPYING ON YOU, BUT IT SEEMS I DIDN'T MAKE IT IN TIME.

MY NEXT OPPONENT IS YOU, THEN?
YES.
I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO IT.
FINALLY, A MATCH WITH A PRO!!
ellesse

Intricacies of the All Japan Championship

Here I will go through the structure of the All-Japan Championship Eichan is currently competing in. The main tournament is a draw of 48, including 12 who qualify from the preliminaries. The preliminaries are split into three groups, A (Eichan's group), B and C.


Main Tournament
Straight entry,
28 in order of Japan ranking
5 tournament winners whose prize money totals ¥1,000,000 or more
3 Wild Cards (WC)
12 qualifiers from the prelims
Total of 48
6
3
3
Prelims A
44 ranked below the top 28 who didn't make the main tournament
4 wild cards (WC)
Total 48
Prelims B
4 who don't meet the ¥1,000,000 requirement, but have won 4 regional tournaments
(In the case they entered the main tournament on ranking, the next person is chosen)
Prelims C
Representatives from the 47 prefectures
47
In the event a player qualifies for multiple groups, they have to right to choose which they will compete in

Maruo, Araya and Kanda are all part of group A as wild cards.

By the way, currently (2014) the actual tournament is a draw of 32, and the prelims have been combined into one group. Among them, 4 people get to advance to the main tournament. While the number of participants has decreased, the prize money has increased

For the girls, Natsu got straight entry into the main tournament as a wild card, and Aki is competing in the prelims.